

GOD'S TWO BOOKS

Scripture and nature together provide a wealth of evidence for a loving Creator.

God desires to make Himself known to us. He has done this in at least three ways: (1) through His Son Jesus Christ; (2) through the work of the Holy Spirit; (3) through His written Word.

Scripture indicates, further, that God may also be known through His creation. This can be inferred from Romans 1:20: “Since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (NIV). The interaction between two of these sources of revelation—Scripture and God’s “second book” of nature—is a subject worthy of consideration.

Considering God’s Way of Communicating With Us

Is God able to communicate truth to humans? Are humans capable of understanding God’s communications?

Surprisingly, the average Christian gives little thought to these questions. This is probably because, as Christian philosopher Ronald Nash notes, historic Christianity has “affirmed both an intelligible revelation from God and the divinely given human ability to know the transcendent God through the medium of true proposi-

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tions.”¹ However, the idea that God can and has communicated to us straightforwardly in the Bible is not something that is taken for granted or even generally accepted among many intellectuals, including liberal Bible scholars.

It is clear that the Bible’s own self-testimony directly affirms that God can and has communicated to us through Scripture.

More than 1,600 verses in the KJV Bible begin with the expression “God says . . .” According to 2 Timothy 3:16, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (NIV).

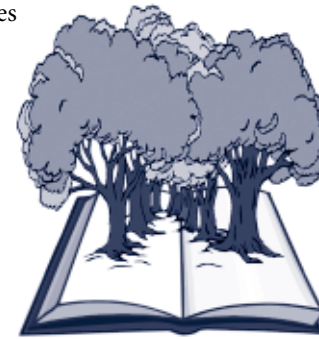
There are, nevertheless, those who question the quality and/or accuracy of that information. Some like to place a special emphasis on the “human” element. They point out that since everything human is fallible, this fallibility must in some manner have been transmitted into the production of Scripture so that even though we call it the Word of God, it must be, in some small way at least, tainted by the human con-

dition through which the information from God passes. The net effect of this line of thinking is that it leaves open a door so that whenever we find an apparent “problem” or “conflict” between the Bible and science, we can dismiss the conflict as the unfortunate result of the human dimension of Scripture.

The danger in this line of reasoning is that it undermines confidence in the Bible as God’s Word.

This is not to deny that the human element exists. The question remains, however, as to whether our “unaided reason” is either empowered or capable of discerning God’s communication. Should humans stand

in judgment of Scripture? Are unaided human minds sufficient for making such a judgment? If we were sitting in church and were asked whether or not fallen humans should be dependent upon God, most of us would immediately answer Yes. Nevertheless, during the workweek, the natural tendency is to live, work, and think as though we were independent creatures. The fact is that the introduction of sin into our world affected all aspects of human existence. This includes the human mind.



Effects of Sin on Human Reason

We generally recognize that sin introduced some profound changes into our world; the most obvious, perhaps, being decay and death (see Romans 8). However, not only our physical bodies have been affected by sin, but also our minds. This means that our ability to reason has been affected. “In our fallen state, with weakened powers and restricted vision, we are incapable of interpreting aright. We need the fuller revelation of Himself that God has given in His written word” (*Education*, p. 17). Of course, we generally recognize as Christians that we need God’s Spirit every day, and we understand that we are to invoke God’s help as we go through the day to live our lives as He would like—to make proper decisions that will be in harmony with His character and will. We often fail to consider the implications of this. To invite the Holy Spirit into our hearts and minds so that we can think and act like Christ means that the Spirit is naturally going to have an impact on our thinking and reasoning process. Indeed, we need the power of God’s Holy Spirit to help us properly reason through things. As theologian Gerhard Hasel observed, “Human reason is also subject to sin and its . . . effects [on the intellect] and is no neutral norm of judgment. Reason needs the light and witness of divine revelation.”²

Fortunately, however, the fact that human reason has been affected by sin does not mean that truth or logic is affected or that truth cannot be discovered and understood. As Nash points out, “Sin does not affect the truth of subject matter such as the multiplication tables. . . . Sin may hinder the ability to reason correctly but it does not alter the laws of valid inference.”³ That is to say, the Fall does not affect the laws of reason, only our ability to employ those laws.

The good news is that even though our power to reason has been affected by sin, God, through the Holy Spirit and His written Word, enables us to overcome the deficiencies imposed by sin. We must, however, avail ourselves of this help. “To know truth, the mind is necessary, but not sufficient. According to Augustine, the created light of human intellect needs a light from without. Even created intelligible light would be unable to account for human knowledge without the constant, immanent, and active presence of God. We must not think of the forms as having been given to humans once-and-for-all. Though the forms are part of the rational structure of the human mind and belong there by virtue of our having been created in the image of God, the soul never ceases to be dependent upon God for its knowledge.”⁴

Theologian B. B. Warfield makes a similar point: “God, having so made

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man, has not left him deistically, to himself, but continually reflects into his soul the contents of His truths which constitute the intelligible world. The soul is therefore in unbroken communion with God, and in the body of intelligible truths reflected from God, sees God.”⁵

The Role of the Holy Spirit in Understanding Scripture

Because sin has adversely affected our ability to understand God’s written revelation, Ellen White counsels us that “Whenever the study of the Scriptures is entered upon without a prayerful, humble, teachable spirit, the plainest and simplest as well as the most difficult passages will be wrested from their true meaning” (*The Great Controversy*, p. 521). Again, “The Bible should never be studied without prayer. The Holy Spirit alone can cause us to feel the importance of those things easy to be understood, or prevent us from wresting truths difficult of comprehension. It is the

office of heavenly angels to prepare the heart so to comprehend God’s word that we shall be charmed with its beauty, admonished by its warnings, or animated and strengthened by its promises” (pp. 599, 600).

Reason, the Holy Spirit, and Nature

Many might argue that it goes without saying that the Holy Spirit is needed if we are to interpret Scripture properly. But what about nature? Referring to the light Adam and Eve possessed before the Fall, Ellen White, wrote that this light not only illuminated their surroundings, physically, but also their ability to perceive “the character” and “the works of God” (*The Ministry of Healing*, pp. 461, 462). After the Fall, they lost this light, and the impact of that loss affects us even today.

“No longer could they read [nature] aright. They could not discern the character of God in His works. So today man cannot of himself read aright the teaching of nature. Unless guided by divine wis-

Views have differed about the amount of authority and the level of reliability of God's written Word for us. However, the fact that our own reasoning ability has been affected by sin and that we are dependent upon God's power for a proper understanding of Scripture should caution us from diminishing either the authority or the reliability of God's Word.

dom, he exalts nature and the laws of nature above nature's God. This is why mere human ideas in regard to science so often contradict the teaching of God's word. But for those who receive the light of the life of Christ, nature is again illuminated. In the light shining from the cross, we can rightly interpret nature's teaching" (ibid.)

Elsewhere she makes a similar point, "The deepest students of science are constrained to recognize in nature the working of infinite power. But to man's unaided reason, nature's teaching cannot be but contradictory and disappointing. Only in the light of revelation can it be read aright" (*Education*, p. 17). "Through faith we understand" (Heb 11:3, NKJV).

Recognizing that we need the Holy Spirit's guidance when we try to understand nature, we need to remember, as we attempt to discern God's message in His second book, that it has not come to us in its original, pristine state. According to the

Bible, God's creation was originally very good (Heb. *tow meod*). Yet because of sin, nature has been blighted—it is not how God intended it to be. According to Ellen White, "Nature still speaks of her Creator. Yet these revelations are partial and imperfect. And in our fallen state, with weakened powers and restricted vision, we are incapable of interpreting aright. We need the fuller revelation of Himself that God has given in His written word" (*Education*, p. 17).

"Inferences erroneously drawn from facts observed in nature have . . . led to supposed conflict between science and revelation; and in the effort to restore harmony, interpretations of Scripture have been adopted that undermine and destroy the force of the word of God. . . . In order to account for His works, must we do violence to His word?" (ibid., pp. 128, 129).

Obviously, we don't want to use God's second book to undermine or destroy the first. In Ellen White's

understanding, when both Scripture and nature are properly understood, there can be no conflict between the two.

"He who has a knowledge of God and His word through personal experience has a settled faith in the divinity of the Holy Scriptures. He has proved that God's word is truth, and he knows that truth can never contradict itself. He does not test the Bible by men's ideas of science; *he brings these ideas to the test of the unerring standard*. He knows that in true science there can be nothing contrary to the teaching of the word; since both have the same Author, a correct understanding of both will prove them to be in harmony. Whatever in so-called scientific teaching contradicts the testimony of God's word is mere human guesswork" (*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 462, italics supplied).

Using God's Two Books Together

Views have differed about the amount of authority and the level of reliability of God's written Word for us. However, the fact that our own reasoning ability has been affected by sin and that we are dependent upon God's power for a proper understanding of Scripture should caution us from diminishing either the authority or the reliability of God's Word. "The Bible and the Bible alone, is to be our creed, the sole bond of union; all who bow to

this Holy Word will be in harmony. Our own views and ideas must not control our efforts. Man is fallible, but God's word is infallible. . . . Let us lift up the banner on which is inscribed, The Bible our rule of faith and discipline" (*Selected Messages*, Book 1, p. 416).

Ellen White's comments about the relationship and interaction between God's two books are similar to a current argument within the area of archaeology. For some time there has been a debate about the role of written materials versus material cultural artifacts (potssherds, building remains, tools, weapons, objects related to food and textile production and use, etc.). Some feel that artifacts are a better source for reconstructing the past because texts can be slanted and may be written too long after an event to be useful. Artifacts, on the other hand, are contemporary and lack the bias that can be injected into a text. Textual scholars, on the other hand, argue that texts are more important than "mute artifacts" because they provide cognitive information—a direct conduit into the thinking of people of the past. Textual scholars feel that through various forms of scholarly analysis, such as textual criticism, they can adequately compensate for the weaknesses of the text. A similar argument occurs between scientists and theologians: Does nature tell us more about God, or does Scripture?

In archaeology, the textual scholars seem to be winning this debate. This may not seem surprising to laypersons, who would rather have a written document from the past than a pile of mute stones. The fact is that in spite of the advances of anthropological and archaeological theory designed to extract information from mute artifacts, it is still difficult to get at the mind of ancient humans merely through their artifacts. The quality and nature of the information content is generally recognized as superior in a written text. One of the reasons for this is that most texts were written with the intention of communicating (revealing, if you will) cognitive information from one mind to the minds of others.

As an archaeologist, when I find an artifact, I try to determine who made it, how it was made, what its purpose was, etc. Though I believe I am trained to do a pretty good job of answering these questions, I would find it much more helpful if the ancient manufacturer had left behind some written account addressing those issues. I like to have the artifact and the text together, with the text giving me guidance as to how and why the artifact was made.

Nature is somewhat analogous to archaeological artifacts. The believing scientist can assume that God is the author of nature and that nature does reveal something about its

Maker. However, the information expressed by nature is not explicit; much more inference is required to determine its meaning. Nature is better understood with the assistance of written material.

Human documents can admittedly be unreliable. In Scripture, however, we have the Word of the infallible Creator to guide us in understanding our world.

As in archaeology, there might be some who feel that the artifact (in this case, nature) is more important than the text (in this case, the Bible). But the question must be asked, “Was God’s original intention and primary purpose in creating nature to reveal Himself to His creation?” This would seem unlikely for several reasons.

First, before the Fall, humanity had direct access to the Creator, so an indirect revelation (material/nature or written) was unnecessary.

Second, we are told that the primary purpose for the creation of the Earth was to be inhabited. That the Creator’s hand can be detected in His work may have been inevitable, but it is of secondary importance. After the Fall, however, when direct access to God was cut off, these incidental indicators assumed both a new role and importance.

Third, it appears that the revelation in nature has been affected by the entrance of sin.

Fourth, if nature were intended

as a complete and satisfactory revelation of God, then God would not have needed to send additional, later revelations through both His Son and the written Word.

Finally, there is a qualitative difference in the information contained in God’s written Word versus His second book. Written revelation is propositional or cognitive revelation, while natural revelation is not. In other words, it is addressed directly to our minds with the purpose of communicating information about God to us.

Though it would be nice to see all conflicts between nature and Scripture resolved, the question needs to be asked, “Do all apparent conflicts need to be resolved?” Any belief in the supernatural is going to collide with science sooner or later. When I took a course in physiology, we had a section on abnormal physiology. When I saw how many things can go wrong, how easy it is for them to go wrong, and, ultimately, how inevitable it is that we will all die, I was duly impressed that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14, KJV). I have become increasingly impressed that all life forms need the sustaining power of God.

Little miracles such as turning water to wine or the resurrection of a dead man are as unacceptable

from a scientific perspective as bigger ones like the Red Sea collapsing or a global Flood. Some folk who want to be accepted by scientists while hanging on to their faith seem to draw protective circles around some supernatural events while casting doubt upon others that violate the conventional understanding of their specialty. This makes them appear inconsistent in their use of Scripture. It may be easier simply to admit that this side of eternity there will be many questions we won’t be able to answer—many problems for which solutions cannot be readily found. Rather than dwelling on those problems that I can’t solve, I have found that there is plenty of positive evidence in both Scripture and nature that point to a loving Creator. □

REFERENCES

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- ² Gerhard Hasel, *Biblical Interpretation Today* (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Research Institute, 1985), p. 96.
- ³ Ronald H. Nash, *op cit.*, p. 109.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- ⁵ B. B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1956), p. 395. See also Nash, p. 90.

